



# The best years of our lives? Coping with stress predicts school grades, life satisfaction, and feelings about high school<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines whether problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping strategies predict key outcomes in a sample of 354 high school students. The four outcomes considered are: academic achievement, life satisfaction, positive feelings towards school, and negative feelings towards school. Results demonstrate that coping incrementally predicts all four outcomes above and beyond the effects of the Big Five personality factors, vocabulary, and demographic variables. Incremental prediction is strongest for school feeling variables, where coping predicts 17.4% of the variance in positive feelings, and 15.9% of the variance in negative feelings. All three coping styles are important in predicting different outcomes: problem-focused coping predicts grades, life satisfaction, and positive feelings about school; emotion-focused coping predicts negative feelings only; and avoidant-focused coping predicts both positive and negative feelings about school. Results suggest that coping styles are an important variable for school outcomes, and that the effectiveness of different strategies differs depending on the outcome considered.

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## 1. Introduction

Transactional models of stress view coping as the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, or physiological processes that follow an individual's appraisal of a situation as stressful (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There are many different taxonomies of coping, but most models encompass Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) initial distinction between problem- and emotion-focused coping with stress (see Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, for a review of coping models). A further distinction is often made between emotion-focused and avoidant coping (Endler & Parker, 1990). In the current study, we used this broad three-dimensional model of coping (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping). Each of these three strategies aims to reduce stress in different ways: problem-focused coping through resolving the root cause of the stressful situation; emotion-focused coping through a focus on one's emotional responses to the stressor; and avoidant coping through avoiding the stressor as much as possible. Coping strategies have been linked with personality traits, life satisfaction, academic achievement, and a range of well-being

measures (e.g., Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Diener, Lucas, & Napa Scollon, 2006; MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2011).

The current study was designed to tease apart the relative influence of personality and coping styles on a range of academic and emotional outcomes in high school students. Specifically, we examine whether students' typical coping styles incrementally predict their achievement, their satisfaction with life, and their positive and negative feelings towards school over-and-above the effects of the Big Five personality factors and cognitive ability indicators. This research is unique in examining the role of coping across such a broad range of outcomes in a high-school sample, focusing not only on grade point average (GPA), but on a broad range of emotion-related outcomes indicative of student well-being. A further strength of this design is the control for standard personality variables when estimating the influence of coping, as personality is known to relate to coping styles (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). In the paragraphs below, we outline how the literature suggests students' coping styles will relate to academic performance and emotional well-being.

## 2. Coping styles and academic achievement

The utility of a particular coping style depends on the nature of the stressor: problem-focused coping may be best for controllable situations, whereas emotion-focused and avoidant coping appears more adaptive in uncontrollable situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Attempting to fix an uncontrollable problem is akin to banging one's head against a brick wall, and is more likely to increase stress than

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reduce it. However, leaving an aversive but controllable situation unresolved is clearly not an effective course of action, and may be particularly stressful if one focuses on the negative emotional reactions to the aversive situation. Research to date suggests that the goal of attaining high grades in secondary and tertiary education most resembles a controllable situation: Problem-focused coping predicts higher grades whereas avoidant-focused coping predicts lower grades (Cooper, Wood, Orcutt, & Albino, 2003; Endler, Kantor, & Parker, 1994; MacCann et al., 2011; Windle & Windle, 1996). Research on emotion-focused coping is mixed. Some studies report a positive relationship between emotion-focused coping and grades (e.g., Edwards & Trimble, 1992), others report a negative relationship (e.g., MacCann et al., 2011; Whatley, Foreman, & Richard, 1998), while still others report no relationship (e.g., Windle & Windle, 1996). In the current study, we expected to replicate the relationships of problem-focused and avoidant coping with students' high-school grades, while also clarifying the relationship between emotion-focused coping and high-school grades.

### 3. Personality, coping styles, and academic achievement

The predominant trait model of personality is the five-factor conceptualization (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992; Tupes & Christal, 1992). Briefly, these factors are: (a) *Extraversion* (the tendency to be friendly, cheerful, social, and energetic); (b) *Agreeableness* (the tendency to be sympathetic, kind, trusting, and co-operative); (c) *Conscientiousness*, (the tendency to be organized, achievement-focused, disciplined, and industrious); (d) *Neuroticism* (the tendency to feel negative emotions such as anxiety and depression); and (e) *Openness to Experience* (the tendency to be open to new feelings, thoughts, and values). These broad personality traits are known to predict academic achievement: Poropat's (2009) recent meta-analysis gave meta-analytic correlations of  $r = .21$  between Conscientiousness and high school grades, and  $r = .12$  between Openness and high school grades. For Conscientiousness, this figure is nearly as high as Poropat's estimate for the relationship between intelligence and grades ( $r = .23$ ), and remained similar in magnitude even after controlling for intelligence.

Coping styles also show consistent relationships with the broad domains of personality. Connor-Smith and Flachsbart's (2007) meta-analysis suggests the following relationships between the five-factor personality model and the three broad coping dimensions. First, problem-focused shows a moderate correlation with Conscientiousness, a small to medium correlation with Extraversion and small correlations with Agreeableness and Neuroticism. Second, emotion-focused coping shows a moderate correlation with Neuroticism, a small to moderate negative relationship with Conscientiousness, and a small negative correlation with Agreeableness. Finally, avoidant coping shows a small to moderate positive relationship to Neuroticism and a small to moderate negative relationship with Conscientiousness. Of note, all three coping styles relate to Conscientiousness, which itself is the most robust personality predictor of academic achievement. Despite the known relationships between personality, coping, and academic achievement, prior research has not systematically controlled for personality or intelligence when examining the relationship between coping styles and achievement. This is a major goal of the current study: To assess whether the relationship between coping and academic achievement remains significant after controlling for personality and intelligence. A strength of the current study is the use of a quasi-representative sample, drawn from five different states across the U.S., and roughly matched to the gender and ethnic composition of the U.S. population.

### 4. Coping and positive emotional outcomes

Although important, high grades are not the be-all and end-all of high school or college life. In fact, academic success does not always translate into a "good" life, or even a positive school experience. For

example, recent research on cultural differences in educational aspirations, beliefs, and practices suggests that an excessive focus on high achievement may lead to negative outcomes such as anxiety and self-doubt (Stankov, 2010). In this article, we additionally consider students' life satisfaction and students' positive and negative reactions towards school as important outcomes in and of themselves. These happiness-related variables are an increasing part of educational policy, which focuses on student well-being, social and emotional learning, and mental health, as well as quantifiable achievement outcomes (see e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). In the current study, we also examine whether coping can incrementally predict these three happiness-related variables above-and-beyond the effects of personality and intelligence.

There is some evidence from studies of high school students that coping relates to outcome variables representing student well-being. Windle and Windle (1996) found that problem-focused coping was negatively related to alcohol use and delinquent activity, whereas emotion-focused coping was positively related to these behaviors. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that avoidance-oriented coping is also associated with higher adolescent alcohol and drug use, more criminal behavior, lower self-esteem, and higher incidents of depressive symptoms (Cooper et al., 2003; Dumont & Provost, 1999; Windle & Windle, 1996). Studies of student populations have also found relationships between coping and various emotional states. Low problem-focused coping relates to negative feelings such as depression and anxiety (Glynshaw, Cohen, & Towbes, 1989; Whatley et al., 1998). Glynshaw et al. also found that anxiety was positively related to a coping strategy called "social entertainment coping", which is most conceptually similar to avoidant coping. Whatley et al. also found that emotion-focused coping predicted depression, anxiety, and state anger. Further still, Diener et al. (2006) argue that the use of effective coping strategies can lead to greater happiness. Specifically, those who use strategies such as problem-focused coping are able to recover from stressful situations more quickly, and thus also return to their baseline level of happiness more quickly, than those who use other less effective forms of coping.

In sum, there is evidence to suggest that the coping styles students use relate in meaningful ways to their emotional experiences. Previous research has not controlled for the influence of major personality traits in this relationship, despite the fact that personality is clearly linked with variables such as life satisfaction and the experience of state emotions (e.g., Hayes & Joseph, 2003; Heaven, 1989; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991). The present study aims to redress this shortcoming.

### 5. Aims of the present research

The main aims of this study were to test the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** Students' coping strategies will predict academic and emotional outcomes and in particular, GPA, life satisfaction, and both positive and negative feelings towards school.

**Hypothesis 2.** The effect of coping on academic and affect-related outcomes will be incremental beyond the effects of cognitive ability, personality, and demographic variables.

### 6. Method

#### 6.1. Participants

The study consisted of 354 high school students (52.5% female) in grades 9 (74.3%) and 10 (25.7%) from five different states of the U.S. The sample comprised the following self-reported ethnicities: White/Other (67.5%), Hispanic (13.0%), and African American (19.5%), which is reasonably close to the general U.S. ethnic composition (67.4%

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